



DESPITE ZOYA'S PROTESTS, Nikolai had refused to remain in Ivets. The beginnings of a plan had formed in his mind, and he didn't want to waste another day languishing at a trade summit. He wasn't interested in Hiram Schenck or his marriageable daughters, and the next time Nikolai conversed with a member of the Kerch Merchant Council, it would be on his own terms.

To that end, though he had plenty of business awaiting him in the capital, his first stop had to be at Count Kirigin's. He needed to collect a bit of information along with his most valued Fabrikator—and, as a rule, if one had the opportunity to visit a pleasure palace, one should. Especially if said pleasure palace served as cover for a secret laboratory.

The elder Count Kirigin was a West Ravkan merchant who had made vast sums of money trading arms and intelligence—and

anything else that wasn't nailed down—to Ravka's enemies. But his son had served with Nikolai in Halmhend, and in exchange for getting to keep his considerable fortune as well as avoiding the disgrace of being stripped of his title and seeing his father thrown in jail forever for treason, the younger Kirigin had pledged both money and fealty to the crown. A more than reasonable bargain.

Nikolai's demands had been unorthodox: Kirigin was already a bit of a rake. Now he was to live decadently, spend wildly, and maintain a reputation as a notorious libertine and social climber. The young count had taken to the role with zeal, staging elaborate parties renowned for their debauchery and doing his best to buy his way into the homes of Ravkan nobles who possessed more illustrious titles and older if less plentiful fortunes. He dressed absurdly, drank excessively, and dithered about with such stupid good cheer that his name had become synonymous with both wealth and buffoonery: *Oh, the Gritzki's son is a terror and unlikely to make much of himself, but at least he's not a Kirigin.*

This was why, when Kirigin bought a vast swath of land just east of Os Alta, no one blinked. *Of course Kirigin wants to be close to the capital, they whispered in sitting rooms and salons. Trying to curry favor with the king and the old families, no doubt. But what man of sense and breeding would ever let his daughter near that upstart?* And when Kirigin commissioned some Zemeni mastermind to design a pleasure compound for him like none ever seen on Ravkan soil—complete with earthworks that required the hiring of thousands of men to dig a valley where there had been none before, a wine cellar said to stretch for a mile underground, and a vast lake that required Grisha Tidemakers to fill it and took days to cross by boat? Well, no one batted an eye. They shook their heads when Kirigin took up hot-air ballooning and laughed behind their hands when the meadows where he launched excursions were

so frequently plagued by fog. *Wasteful, grotesque, obscene*, they chorused. And all hoped for invitations to one of Kirigin's spectacular fetes.

Kirigin dubbed his magnificent compound Lazlayon, the Gilded Hollow—though it was so often cloaked in mists and damp that it was usually referred to as the Gilded Bog—and the parties he threw there were indeed legendary. But they were also part of a grand lie, a lie essential to Ravka's future.

As it turned out, Kirigin's wine cellar ran for five miles, not one, and it was not a wine cellar at all but an underground bunker devoted to weapons development. The lake was used for prototypes of under-sea craft and Nikolai's new naval warfare ventures. The dense fog that shrouded the valley was frequently helped along by Grisha Squallers to provide cover from prying eyes and Fjerdan air surveillance. The ballooning meadow was in fact an airfield; the elaborate gardens hid two long, straight runways for testing experimental aircraft; and the frequent fireworks Kirigin staged disguised the sound of rifle fire and shelling.

There was, of course, no mysterious Zemeni architect. Nikolai had designed the Gilded Bog himself—though young Count Kirigin's fortune had paid for its construction. The king visited occasionally as a party guest, to ride or hunt or drink Kirigin's excellent wines. But more often, he arrived in secret through one of his own private entrances and went immediately to see to the progress of his latest endeavor.

Nikolai always felt a sense of excitement as he entered the Gilded Bog. The palace at Os Alta was full of ghosts. His father's crimes. His mother's failings. The memory of his brother's body bleeding on the floor as the Darkling's shadow soldiers smashed through the windows of the Eagle's Nest. But Lazlayon was Nikolai's creation. Here,

for a short time, the demon that ruled his nights and troubled his dreams retreated, held at bay by logic, the hope of progress, and the happy pastime of building giant things meant to explode. But the Gilded Bog was not only a playground for his inventions—it was also where the strengths of the First and Second Armies, of traditional weaponry and Grisha power, would be forged into something new.

*Hopefully, thought Nikolai as he and Tolya reached the front steps of the main house. Or it's where I'll spend the last of Ravka's war chest and have nothing to show for it but a pile of rusty propellers and a chilly lake that makes for mediocre sailing.*

Ravka was many things to him: a grand lady who required constant courting, a stubborn child unwilling to stand on its own, and most often, a drowning man—the more Nikolai struggled to save it, the harder it fought. But with the help of the scientists and soldiers at the Gilded Bog, he might just drag his country to shore yet.

“Your Highness!” Kirigin said as he swept down the stairs to greet Nikolai. His orange hair had been arranged in a sleek coiffure, and he was turned out in a violet coat and gold brocade wholly inappropriate to the hour. Beside Tolya dressed in stolid olive drab and mounted on his towering stock horse, Kirigin looked like an actor in the wrong play. “How can I be expected to prepare the best entertainments when you give me no notice of your arrival?”

“Ah, Kirigin,” said Nikolai, ignoring the formality of the count’s bow to embrace him and slap him on the back. “I know you like to improvise.”

“A visit to the wine cellar is the perfect place to start. Do come inside.”

“Tolya and I would prefer to have a ride around your grounds. Will you be stocking game for the season?”

“Of course, Your Highness. We must have sport to keep us warm

this winter, and if not, the three hundred bottles of Kerch brandy I've laid my hands on should do the trick."

*For Saints' sake.* Nikolai sometimes worried that Kirigin had taken to his role as a reprobate with a little too much enthusiasm. "Just don't get the entirety of my cabinet soused," he said. "I need a few coherent ministers on hand."

"Of course, of course," said Kirigin, peering down the drive, the hope clear on his face. *Poor fool.*

"Zoya has gone directly to the capital."

Kirigin cleared his throat. "It's of no matter to me. I just wondered if I should have that cordial she likes waiting. Is Commander Nazyalensky well?"

"Pretty as a picture and brimming with spite."

"She is lovely, isn't she?" said Kirigin dreamily. "I'll leave you to it, then. And if you would . . . send her my regards?"

"All Saints," rumbled Tolya. "She'd have you for breakfast."

The count grinned. "Might not be such a bad way to go, eh?"

"Kirigin, old friend," said Nikolai, "you're a good fellow. Why not find yourself a nice girl who likes hunting and can feel warmly toward a wastrel?"

Kirigin shuffled his feet like a schoolboy. "I just can't help but feel that Commander Nazyalensky's icy demeanor masks a tender spirit."

Tolya snorted. "She'll pulp your heart and drink it."

Kirigin looked aghast, but Nikolai suspected Tolya was right. He'd come to recognize the bizarre phenomenon of Zoya's beauty, the way men loved to create stories around it. They said she was cruel because she'd been harmed in the past. They claimed she was cold because she just hadn't met the right fellow to warm her. Anything to soften her edges and sweeten her disposition—and what

was the fun in that? Zoya's company was like strong drink. Bracing—and best to abstain if you couldn't handle the kick.

Nikolai hoisted himself back into the saddle. “Commander Nazyalensky's icy exterior masks an even icier interior, but I will most certainly let her know you wish her health.”

He nudged his horse into a trot and Tolya followed suit. They made their way along the white gravel path that ran parallel to the eastern side of the main house. Through the windows, Nikolai heard music from the parlors and gaming rooms. He glimpsed bodies swathed in silk and jewels and saw a man wearing nothing but an admiral's hat and beating a large pot with a spoon as he ran down the hall.

Tolya's scowl was deep enough to sow seeds in. “The crown shouldn't be associated with such displays.”

“Perhaps not,” conceded Nikolai. “But the Ravkan people like their leaders with just a touch of the unseemly about them. They don't trust a man of too much virtue.”

Tolya narrowed his golden eyes. “And you really trust a man of so little?”

“I know you don't approve. But Kirigin has played the part I've asked him to. He may not be the brightest fellow, but he's loyal.”

“He can't possibly think Zoya would spare him her time.”

“Let us pray she never does. Poor Kirigin would be better off trying to waltz with a bear.”

Even so, Nikolai thought neither Zoya nor Tolya gave the young count enough credit. Kirigin's affability and lack of ambition hid a good heart. He was an honorable man with romantic ideas of duty to his country and profound shame over the way his father had conducted himself—something with which Nikolai could sympathize. Nikolai was acutely aware of his own father's reputation. It was one of the many reasons he kept his public visits to Lazlayon to a mini-

mum. From the moment he'd contemplated taking the throne, Nikolai had known he would have to be a better man than his father and a better king than his brother could have ever hoped to be. Vasily had been killed by the Darkling, and Nikolai had done his best to grieve for him, but the truth was that his brother's untimely death had proved quite timely indeed.

Nikolai was pleased to see two groundskeepers emerge from the hedges as soon as he and Tolya left the gravel path. Kirigin's entire staff, from scullery maid to groom to head housekeeper, was made up of the king's spies.

"Any falcons in the skies?" Nikolai called, using the code that would allow them to pass without triggering security protocols.

"No, but we hear there are foxes in the woods," one of the men replied, and they returned to their work.

The codes changed each week and were just one of the ways they kept the real business of the Gilded Bog secure.

The southern shore of the lake was heavy with unnatural mist, and only when he and Tolya had passed through the haze did they see the docks bustling with both Grisha and First Army engineers. The waters were arrayed with the latest prototypes of Nikolai's hydrofoil fleet. The real fleet would be constructed at a hidden base on Ravka's coast—small gunners and huge transportation ships that could carry everything from troops to aircraft. Assuming Nikolai could somehow find the money to finance the project. Not even Kirigin was rich enough to modernize an entire navy.

Nikolai would have liked to stay and watch the tests, but he had other priorities today. He and Tolya tethered their horses by one of the moss-covered grottoes and entered the caves. The air should have been moist, but the grotto was not a real one, and the humidity in the labs and the passageways inside was strictly regulated by Squallers.

Nikolai found the appropriate notch in the stone by a cluster of fake salt lilies and punched his thumb into the divot. The stone shifted, revealing a brass chamber. He pulled a lever, the door clanked shut, and he and Tolya were descending, down, down, six stories into the earth to Kirigin's infamous "wine cellar." It could be reached from hidden elevators located throughout the property.

"I hate this part," muttered Tolya. "Feels like being buried."

Nikolai knew Tolya had almost been killed in a cave-in during his time with the Sun Summoner. "You should wait above. Watch them test the new engines. I could use a report on their success."

Tolya cast Nikolai a baleful glance. He tightened the knot that restrained his long black hair, and folded his huge tattooed arms. "Tamar says fears are like weeds. They grow wild if left unattended."

Well and good for Tamar—Tolya's twin was essentially fearless. "So forcing yourself underground is a bit of light gardening?"

Tolya gritted his teeth. "If I don't face it, I'll never get over it."

Nikolai chose to hold his tongue. If the sweat on Tolya's massive brow or his clenched jaw was any indication, these excursions beneath the earth were doing him no good at all. But the war had left all of them with wounds, and Tolya had the right to tend to his as he saw fit. Nikolai flexed his fingers in his gloves and thought of the black scars staining his fingers. *Would I have the courage to look the monster in the eye?* He truly didn't know.

When the doors to the elevator opened, they exited to another brass chamber, their passage blocked by a thick steel door. Nikolai set to opening the Schuyler combination locks he'd learned about from a certain master thief in Ketterdam. A moment later, the door swung open and he was home.

The laboratories were separated into four main divisions, though all of them worked together as needed: artillery and body armor, naval warfare, aerial warfare, and the labs devoted to trying to



develop both an antidote to *jurda parem* and a strain of the drug that might allow Grisha to heighten their powers without making them addicts. His first stop was always the labs. He spoke briefly to his Alkemi to confirm what he'd suspected regarding the antidote based on their last report, collected a tiny vial of the stuff to share with the Triumvirate. Nikolai wanted something concrete to dangle before his advisers, given what he intended to propose.

It took them a little longer to find David Kostyk, since the Fabrikator worked in every division of the laboratory. But eventually they discovered him hunched over a set of blueprints by the vast tanks where the latest prototypes of their new submersibles were being built in miniature. The sleeves of his purple Fabrikator's *kefta* were threadbare, and his poorly cut brown hair gave him the appearance of a shaggy dog deep in thought.

Through the glass, Nikolai saw the most recent version of his *izmars'ya*, his underwater fleet. On land, they looked clumsy: wide, flat, and ungainly, like someone had taken a quality piece of metal and pounded it into a winged pancake. But beneath the surface, they became something elegant, sinuous predators that glided through the depths, their movements guided by Tidemakers, their crews provided with breathable air through a combination of Squaller power and a filter that had taken Nikolai and David the better part of a year to perfect. The real challenge would be arming the fleet. Only then would his ships become a true school of sharks. After that? It wouldn't matter how many warships Ravka's enemies built. The *izmars'ya* would be able to move through the world's oceans unseen and attack without ever surfacing. They would change the face of naval warfare.

David looked up from where he was consulting with Nadia Zhabin over the pendulum-and-valve system they were developing for missile targeting. "They're testing the surface engines today," he said.

"And good morning to you, David."

“Is it morning?”

“The sunrise was my first indication,” said Nikolai. “How do the new missiles look?”

“We’re still trying to get them to maintain course,” said Nadia, her pale, pointed features tinged blue from the light reflecting off the tank. She was a Squaller who had fought beside the Sun Summoner with her younger brother, Adrik, but she’d shown her true potential in weapons design. She’d been integral in the development of the *izmars’ya*. “I think we’re close.”

Though the inventor in Nikolai thrilled at the news, his enthusiasm was tempered by the conversation he’d had with Hiram Schenck back in Ivets. He could practically feel the Kerch breathing down his neck, and it wasn’t a sensation he relished.

Nikolai had two rules for his Nolniki—the scientists and soldiers who labored at the Gilded Bog, his Zeroes who were neither First nor Second Army but both. Above all else, be thieves. Take the work of their enemies and turn it against them. It didn’t matter if Ravka got to the technology first as long as they found ways to make it better. The Fjerdans had developed an engine to drive wagons and armored tank battalions, so the Ravkans had made it powerful enough to move massive ships. The Fjerdans had built steel aircraft that didn’t require Squaller skill to pilot, so Ravka’s Fabrikators stole the design and constructed sleeker flyers in safer, lighter aluminum. The second rule? Be fast. Fjerda had made huge leaps in military technology over the last year—how he did not yet know—and Ravka had to find a way to keep pace.

Nikolai tapped the blueprints on the table. “If the fuel tests for the surface engines go well, how long until the *izmars’ya* are operational?”

“A matter of weeks,” said Nadia.

“Excellent.”

“But we can’t put anything into production without more steel.”

“And you’ll have it,” Nikolai promised. He could only hope he was telling the truth.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Nadia said with a smile and a bow.

Somehow she still had faith in her king, but Nikolai wasn’t sure if he found her ready confidence reassuring or worrisome. He had always found a way to keep the rusty, ramshackle machine that was Ravka grinding along—by finding that extra bit of money when they needed it most, making the right alliance at the right time, cobbling together some invention that would make their meager standing army a match for the vast forces commanded by the enemies at their borders. For Nikolai, a problem had always presented an opportunity no different than one offered by a Fjerdan engine. You stripped it down to its parts, figured out what drove it, then used those pieces to build something that worked for you instead of against you.

The demon disagreed. The demon wasn’t interested in problem-solving or statecraft or the future. It was nothing but hunger, the need of the moment, what could be killed and consumed.

*I’ll find a way.* All his life, Nikolai had believed that. His will had been enough to shape not only his fate but his own identity. He had chosen what he wanted people to see—the obedient son, the feckless rogue, the able soldier, the confident politician. The monster threatened all of that. And they were no closer to finding a way to drive the thing out than they had been six months ago. What was there to do but keep moving? Lesser animals whined and struggled when they’d been caught in a snare. The fox found a way out.

“David, did you sleep here last night?” Nikolai asked.

The Fabrikator frowned. “I don’t think so.”

“He spent the night here,” Nadia clarified. “He didn’t actually sleep.”

“Did *you*?” asked Nikolai.

“I . . . dozed for a bit,” Nadia replied evasively.

“I’m taking you home to Tamar.”

“But I need her for the fuel tests,” David objected.

“And I’m taking *you* home to Genya,” added Nikolai.

“But—”

“Don’t argue, David. Makes me want to blow something up to assert my authority. I need the Triumvirate together. And I’m going to need you and Nadia to start work on a new prototype of the *izmars’ya*.”

Nadia brushed her blond hair from her eyes. “I can start now, Your Highness.”

“Don’t go running off to display your excessive competence just yet. I want you to make sure this particular prototype doesn’t work.”

David began rolling up his blueprints, carefully arranging his pens and instruments. “I don’t like it when he doesn’t make sense.”

Nadia raised her brows. “I assume Your Highness has a reason?”

*I always do.* He would drag the drowning man to shore kicking and screaming if he had to—no matter what the demon demanded.

“I’m going to stage a little play,” said Nikolai, already imagining a moonlit lake and all the glorious chaos he intended to incite there.

“That means I need the right props.”